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**Libraries Without Walls and Open and Distance Learning in Africa:
The Nigerian Experience**

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Abstract

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is gradually gaining ground in Africa. Nigeria is a newcomer in the Open and Distance Learning paradigm. The experiences of several open and distance learning institutions such as the Open University of United Kingdom (OUUK), Athabasca University (Canada's Open University), Open University of Hong Kong, Indira Gandhi National Open University, (IGNOU), and University of South Africa (UNISA), have provided a baseline for the take-off of the only Open University in Nigeria – the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN). The successful take-off of NOUN is not without the incorporation of functional libraries. Effective library support to distance learners is mandatory for qualitative delivery of instruction and learning. This is where the developments in information and telecommunications are potent. This gave impetus to the development of virtual library services or library without walls. This development has definite benefits to distance learners. Developed and developing countries are now creating virtual learning environments and libraries without walls to reach multitudes of learners at various locations. This paper examines the general experiences of ODL in Africa, the evolution of ODL in Nigeria and the structure of library services provided to distant learners, particularly in Nigeria. It examines the challenges in creating and delivering a library without walls for distance education and the prospects of such a library without walls in a developing country like Nigeria. The paper will also present a discussion on how NOUN is developing creative solutions to the challenges.

Keywords: Distance learning, Library without walls, National Open University of Nigeria, Library services, Africa, Nigeria.

Introduction

“Education is widely recognised as central to sustainable economic and social development. African countries, however, face tremendous challenges vis-à-vis other geographies and regions. Rapidly increasing demands for all levels and forms of education, coupled with local and regional governments’ limited capacity to expand the provision of education through traditional bricks-and-mortar institutions, leaves open and distance learning (ODL) as a viable option to address and match growing demand” (Aderinoye, Siaciwena & Wright, 2009:1). Open and distance learning since its introduction in Africa has enabled several countries to provide relatively affordable forms of access to formal education. This, in turn, raises the basic living standard of Africans in all sectors of society. The ODL mode is gradually permeating the African continent. It is becoming an increasingly acceptable mode of learning in the delivery of certain specialised courses such as agriculture, healthcare, entrepreneurship training etc. It is being used as a veritable means for reducing poverty levels through the development of human resource capacity. In spite of this, challenges are facing Open and Distance Learning in Africa.

Open and Distance Learning In Africa

Africa has since joined in the pursuit and development of tertiary education through the open and distance learning mode. In 1988, there was only one open university in Africa; today there are nine (Wikipedia, 2019). The higher education landscape of the 21st century is significantly different from that of previous centuries. There are more entrants to higher education today than at any time in the past. Higher education in Africa has evolved from an elitist pursuit into a mass system. The pressure

of numbers is one thing that traditional institutions are not equipped to cope with. Their capacities can only be raised minimally to respond to the ever-increasing demand. The only alternative is the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) system (Kanwar, 2008).

Aderinoye and Siaciwena (2008) observe rightly that in spite of the success of ODL in Africa, several issues remain to be addressed:

Lack of political support and legitimacy: lack of understanding of both the potential and limitation of ODL is widespread in many African countries. Harboursing the belief that ODL cannot possibly offer the same quality of education as conventional campus-based education, many educational policymakers and planners remain sceptical about the legitimacy and quality of ODL.

Policy issues: most African countries lack policies needed to guide the development and implementation of ODL programmes at national and international levels. This has been a significant setback to many ODL institutions in Africa. It is a fact that open and distance learning is successfully sustained where there are clear and unambiguous policy directives governing its application and implementation. In fact, many are still sceptical of the efficacy of the ODL system.

Inadequate capacity: lack of infrastructure and professional competencies in ODL remain important barriers. In many African countries, there is a dire shortage of qualified staff required for guiding and influencing the development of ODL policies and for planning, developing, managing, and evaluating ODL programmes. In addition, most ODL institutions are handcuffed by financial constraints. Several distance learning institutions in Africa were started without adequate provision for funds and many of the institutions grew and expanded so rapidly beyond the available resources, and as a result,

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they have been unable to maintain both the quantity and quality of their services as well as the efficiency of their operations.

Sustainability: Many ODL programmes fail because they are not fully integrated into mainstream education systems. Consequently, ODL programmes tend not to attract the political support required for their successful implementation.

Africa faces enormous socio-economic challenges. Moreover, there is increasing recognition and acceptance that education may be the only way to ensure the sustainability of communities and nations as healthy, vibrant and functioning societies and democracies, and for individuals to escape from the viciousness of poverty (Dhanarajan, 2002). The good news is that there are many successful ODL programmes across the continent and there are efforts underway aimed at addressing the challenges of development. One of these viable efforts is the provision of Library Without Walls (LWW). It was found necessary that an academic resource that cuts across boundaries should be employed to support all the students remotely located across every corner of the country (Ngimwa, 2006).

Libraries Without Walls in Developed ODL Institutions

From visits to some libraries of open and distance learning institutions in Canada, Hong Kong, and the United Kingdom and relevant literature on ODL, innovative approaches in library services are being implemented. The Open University, United Kingdom established in 1969 has its electronic reference library, ROUTES – Resources for Open University Teachers and Students. This is a database of courses and subjects accessible to staff and students. They also have skills in Accessing, Finding and Reviewing Information (SAFARI) which is a free interactive tutorial to assist students to

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use such tools as databases, online catalogue, the Internet, and identify, evaluate and organise information. The Open University of Canada, Athabasca has developed the Digital Reading Room, an electronic reserve that provides access to databases and teaching materials from faculties. According to Magusin and Kay (2004), the Digital Reading Room has resources that do not need copyright permission and requests for document delivery and suggested readings are handled from the Digital Reading Room. The Open University of Hong Kong (OUHK) library provides in-campus facilities and remote access to library resources. The OUHK electronic reserve comprises e-journals, indexes and abstracts, dictionaries and encyclopaedias, directories and handbooks, e-news etc. accessed by active students, staff, and part-time tutors. The OUHK examination papers, reference materials, electronic theses and dissertations can also be accessed. The library catalogue is also available online. The Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) established in 1985 has made remarkable progress in developing library services for distance learners. It has libraries at the regional and study centres and central library at headquarters. However, it has maintained base library operations through computerisation using LibSys. IGNOU library is behind in providing access to commercial databases, Internet services and a fully networked environment. The University of South Africa (UNISA), a dual-mode institution, is one of the first universities to begin distance education as its main focus. It started in 1947. The UNISA mode of teaching was mostly that of print-based correspondence. Lectures were provided through printed study guides and augmented by recommended textbooks. The UNISA library has developed extensive collections over the years of its existence. Information and communications technologies are appropriately integrated into library services.

Open and Distance Learning in Nigeria

Nigeria with a population of an estimated 200 million people has 174 federal, state and private universities, 132 polytechnics, 26 monotechnics, 89 Colleges of Education, 36 Colleges of Agriculture, and 86 Colleges of Health Services (Bolaji, 2019; Olusegun, 2019; Obiora, 2019 and HRORBN, 2019). These institutions, over the past decade, are only able to absorb less than 20% of candidates qualified for higher education. Naturally, the government has been concerned about how to cater to the teeming, vibrant populace who are not absorbed by any of the existing higher institutions. To ameliorate this situation, the Open University of Nigeria was formally established in 1983. This was unilaterally dismantled as speedily as it was established by the then military regime of Gen. Mohammed Buhari in 1984.

In many cases, distance learning is the only way to achieve the scale, the scope and the impact required to tackle the challenges of education and training faced in Africa (John Daniel 2005). With access to higher education through the traditional higher institutions in Nigeria less than 20%, the reinvigoration of the defunct Open University of Nigeria seems a natural solution. In 2002, the defunct Open University of Nigeria was resuscitated and reactivated to the National Open University of Nigeria. This is the only Open University in Nigeria. There are over 100,000 registered students from all classes of society. Currently, there are over 70 Study Centres across Nigeria. Course materials are centrally produced at the headquarters and dispatched to the Study Centres. Students register, collect course materials and attend tutorial facilitation at the Study Centres. Each centre is directed by a Manager in the rank of Professor with a retinue of other staff.

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Registration, assessments, and examinations are carried out at the Study Centres. There are also provisions for library services at most of the study centres.

Libraries Without Walls in National Open University of Nigeria – Initiatives

Libraries are indispensable institutions in every tertiary education. Jagannathan (2006) also asserts that libraries have always been a major focus for all kinds of learning, formal and informal. The library is at the heart of the traditional university or college, providing access to collections, specialist help support, use of technology and a place to study alone or with fellow students (Watson, 2006). Here, I refer to the elaborate definition of library without walls by Jagannathan (2006) that “libraries without walls” is a phrase that describes a library without physical infrastructure such as library building, operational sections, reading and stack rooms, circulation counter, furniture, equipment, collections in diverse media, and so on. They are embedded into a virtual library and accessed through the Internet from any computer system – desktop or laptop. The advent of ICT has brought about a dramatic transformation in all aspects of education including library and information services. Books are no longer like bricks in the walls of libraries; instead, they have got converted into bits and bytes to create libraries without walls. Browning (1993) expressed his view that books once hoarded in subterranean stacks are now scanned into computers and made available to anyone, anywhere, almost instantly, over high-speed networks... instead of fortresses of knowledge, there are oceans of information. Implementing this vision transforms libraries from guardians of tradition to catalysts of a profound change. This dissolves the barriers that separate libraries from their users, especially distant learners.

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In spite of the low level of technological development in Nigeria, yet technology is enhancing the capacity of library services delivered to distance learners. While open and distance education is an effective and versatile means of addressing the problems of human resource development in Africa, a paramount concern is adequate and appropriate services to support distance students. There is a growing recognition that the provision of excellent library services is a crucial factor (Watson & Jagannathan, 1996; Ritterbush, 2014). Distance education presents new challenges in information dissemination, especially in developing countries. Preparing and presenting library services to open and distance learners in Nigeria invoke unique issues (Sterling, McKay & Ericson, 2016). Technology has given us the opportunity and privilege of creating libraries without walls. Interestingly, this helps to access and utilise learning resources on our palms without a physical visit to the four walls of the library. It is axiomatic that the phrase ‘libraries without walls’ connotes libraries that are not restricted to the physical boundaries of the library building and all the paraphernalia of traditional library services. Libraries without walls (LWW) or virtual libraries can be accessed and utilised wherever there is Internet access. It is no longer news even in developing countries that information and communication technologies have dramatically transformed every segment of the society particularly information collection, processing, storage, retrieval and dissemination.

The NOUN library aims at value-added library services to the distance learners. Several projects have been initiated and are at an advanced stage of implementation. The structure of library and information services in NOUN is hybrid. Effective library services have been established in key centres such as Lagos, Kaduna, Enugu, Benin and Abuja - the Federal Capital Territory and the current head office of the National Open

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University of Nigeria, The NOUN library which began as a hybrid system has collections in various formats. It has the electronic resources segment with high-speed Internet facilities and a range of electronic resources and databases. Library services *ab initio* was designed to be fully electronic and online catalogue projected to be accessed by staff and students from anywhere in the world. Small libraries to support distance learners are designed for all the Study Centres. These provide access to various forms of collections to learners, the majority of who still suffer from cyberphobia – the fear of computers. The University Strategic Plan is for the NOUN library to develop a veritable network of libraries with the main library at the headquarters, and core libraries at Kaduna, Enugu, Calabar, Lagos, Benin and other mega centres as they develop and small libraries at all the other study centres. The NOUN library is referred to as *Information Gateway* with a virtual information resource unit at Lagos supported with sixty-five fully networked computers with wireless Internet access. Complete automation of circulation, cataloguing, serials, multimedia, indexing and abstracting is designed with the Sierra software if this is not truncated in the journey of development and change.

Information Literacy

User education is a significant component of effective library services. Library instruction is designed to enable library users to benefit maximally from library resources and services and inculcate the necessary skills for lifelong learning. For distance education learners, user education is equally important. How do we reach the myriad of distance learners scattered across every corner of Nigeria with information literacy? This is a Herculean task. Online tutorials and multimedia packages accessible on the web and

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DVD ROM are evolving for the staff and students of the National Open University of Nigeria.

Challenges

Other major challenges facing the NOUN library in developing library without walls include the following:

- i. lack of trained personnel – knowledgeable dedicated manpower
- ii. paucity and misapplication of the library fund
- iii. low capacity infrastructure – Africa is still struggling with fundamental technological challenges such as very limited bandwidth and inadequate IT infrastructure critical to successful exploitation of digital resources (Ngimwa 2006).
- iv. low Internet penetration and access
- v. low perception of the worth and value of libraries
- vi. government's lethargic approach to virtual libraries

Future Plans

In Sub-Sahara Africa, the National Open University of Nigeria Library aims at being the benchmark for best practices in providing rich and valuable library services to students and staff. We have enthusiastically embraced technology to deliver and improve access to information resources and library services. The library is creating the *Information Gateway Learning Toolkit (INGLET)* which is similar to the Deakin Learning Toolkit of Deakin University and SAFARI of Open University of United Kingdom. It is aimed at inculcating information literacy skills and facilitating access to library resources and services. The INGLET will have two versions: Online and DVD

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ROM versions. The DVD ROM version will be distributed free to registered students to be used on their private computers. The toolkit will contain multimedia tutorials to assist learners to acquire the necessary skills to explore the Internet, use the Library's electronic databases and e-journals, resources on NOUN library, using the Online Public Access Catalogue. It will also contain orientation modules and information guides in PDF format, software for staff and students to install and use, e.g. Adobe Acrobat Portable Documents Format. It will also include selected search engines, relevant websites etc. The toolkit will help to reduce barriers in accessing and using library resources and services. It would be a wealth of information and resources to distance learners eliminating the cost and travails of telecommunications requirements. The NOUN library also contemplates Automated Current Awareness Services/Selective Dissemination of Information.

Conclusion

The goal of every university library in Nigeria is to facilitate the realisation of the tripartite functions of the university which include: teaching, research and community service. No tertiary institution can exist without adequate library services. The challenge of providing library services to distance learners is enormous. However, technology has provided the impetus to break boundaries and reach distance learners. In spite of hurdles and barriers, the National Open University of Nigeria is poised to harness the benefits and potentials of developments in information and communication technology to create library without walls – a benchmark and a reference point in Sub-Saharan Africa.

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